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Learning Community in an Innovation System

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Abstract:

This paper examines how a Learning Community within the Innovation system Fiber Optic Valley is conducted. The group consists of people from 10 different organisations, both private and public. The project is a result of the knowledge and results of the R & D project Gender Network (Andersson 2009). Methodology from Action Research has been used in framing the processes. In particular, Action Learning (McGill & Brockbank 2004) has given both a theoretical basis and methods for building on the relationship between reflection and action. Learning from and reflecting on experiences opens new possibilities to reconsider past events, making sense of one's actions and finding new ways of behaviour at future events (ibid: 13).

Learning Community is part of an approach called Action-Oriented Gender Research. It is a merger of gender research and learning theories from Action research. It is placed in the intersection between practical equality work and gender research – with the so-called doing gender-perspective (West & Zimmerman 1987, Acker 1992).

Key words: Action-oriented Gender Research, Learning community, intervention, Doing gender, reflection and action.

PRESENTATION AND BACKGROUND

The group in Learning Community is one part of a bigger project about applied gender research in innovation systems. It started in 2009 and runs until the end of 2011. It is performed within the regional innovation system called Fiber Optic Valley, and is financed by Vinnova (The Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems). The project aims at creating gender aware organisations within the innovation system.

An earlier project, called the Gender Network, which lasted from 2006 to 2008, formed a basis for the current project. That project consisted of 13 middle managers from different organisations, which performed joint learning about gender in different ways (Andersson et al 2009). My role in that project was as process leader.

The current research and development project is built on the foundation of the former project. Three of the organisations that participated in the former project are now case studies where we conduct co-research and work with middle managers as change agents, or “Innovative Leaders” as they are called (“we” in this case is myself and Susanne Andersson as gender researchers and Marita Svensson as project manager).

The overall aim is to deepen the work that started in the Gender Network. In addition, we also wanted to broaden the scope of the Innovation system. One part of that aim was to design the Learning Community. Ten different organisations from both the private and public sector are participating with 2 – 4 persons in the Learning Community. It is a group of 26 participants, 15 women and 11 men. Almost all of them are middle managers. The group meets two days every six months. In total, there will be four large meetings as a part of the project. Local meetings in between are also organised by the group.

Because of the history of the Gender Network, several of the participants have an earlier understanding and knowledge of gender and organisations. The participating organisations and several of its members in the Learning Community have been a part of the Gender Network and /or other seminar and knowledge processes about gender connected to that project. The three organisations forming the case studies are participating, and form a base for knowledge creation in a bigger context. That element is an important part of what has been possible for the group; a group “new” to gender theory and research would be something very different. With an inexperienced group of participants, we would have needed more time to create a common knowledge base to build from. While we have done that in part, here we were able to go directly to a joint learning and knowledge process, which I will get back to.

Andersson’s (2009) research with these 13 middle managers as change agents showed that they had the power to both allocate different tasks and influence values at the workplace around them. It was also observed that some of the managers were able to admit that they had different expectations of female and male employees. That was often not reflected, but it emerged in the research project. The kind of knowledge processes made in the network, combined with the researcher being located at the organisation, created a lot of possibilities for gender awareness and new possible patterns of actions. This paper is about thoughts and perspectives in the Learning Community within the R & D project that aims for gender aware organisations and exploring the role of gender connected to innovations. Theoretical perspectives are presented and then an example of a joint learning process in the group follows.

ACTION ORIENTED RESEARCH

The gender study framework is based on theories of gender systems (Hirdman 1990, 2001) and the so-called doing gender perspective (West & Zimmerman 1987, West & Fenstermaker 2002). Gender is created in organisations through interactions. A model of how gender is created has been used (Acker

1999, Gunnarsson et al 2003, Andersson et al 2009, Linghag 2009). The model was developed by Joan Acker (1999) and has been expanded by Nordic and other researchers (Gunnarsson et al 2003, Gunnarsson et al 2007, Andersson et al 2009). It was used as the point of departure for the participants' studies and consists of the following four processes:

- Procedures, activities, and divisions
- Interactions between Individuals and Groups
- Images, Symbols, and Forms of Consciousness
- Internal Mental Work

(Acker 1999)

The model helps to focus not only the counting of women and men in an organisation, a quantitative measure (Andersson & Amundsdotter 2010) but also the qualitative aspects of gender processes in an organisation – which comes out as conditions for women and men – how you can move in the organisation, what kind of work tasks you get to do, how you are listened to, what kind of competence you receive feedback on, etc. This paper follows an example of a shared knowledge process after the participants have made different gender observations. This model and gender theory was thought to be a practical tool to conduct co-research in the various organisations. The model can help to anchor gender equality work in gender research so that all kinds of aspects and conditions based on gender become subject to change (Ibid, p 7).

We call this kind of research Action Oriented Research. It has been developed in the Gender Network (Andersson 2009, Andersson & Amundsdotter 2010) and in my dissertation work (Amundsdotter 2009b). The Action Oriented Research is a merger between Gender Research and Learning Theories from Action Research (Andersson & Amundsdotter 2010). Using gender theories and methodologies in processes of change is an important part of addressing power relations and how gender is constructed in various organisations. However, the use of gender theories – which in itself often can be both challenging of the every day life of the organisation and by that can create both possibilities and strong tensions – does not automatically lead to people wanting to start change processes. A combination of Gender research and Action research can support this kind of research where focus is both on how gender is handled and how changes can be created – and knowledge about the change processes as a part of the outcome.

Theories of how gender is constructed is used to frame co-research among the participants. Theory and methodology from Action Research is combined, not the least concept and methods on joint learning (West & Zimmerman 1987, McGill & Brockbank 2004, Johannisson, Gunnarsson & Stjernberg 2008).

Joint Learning

In the anthology about joint learning—the interactive research practice—ideas are developed about interactive research in Sweden (Johannisson, Gunnarsson & Stjernberg 2008). The concept of “joint learning” means different things. Johannisson (2008) discusses the concept and says that the choice of the verb form, ‘to learn jointly’, does not only indicate dialogue as a path to increased insight, but also the idea that life is shaped by an interplay of concrete action and reflection. The research can create a collective voice through which a variety of groups can be heard. Svensson (2008) points out that it is a democratic project; a counterforce to an elitist knowledge production. Johannisson (2008) maintains that interactive research needs to challenge the prevailing ideas that structures in society determine the conditions for people's actions in different ways (Johannisson 2008). He argues that this is necessary in order to liberate people and their ideas, and so that joint learning is a way of creating meaning in a process in which everyone is a subject or co-actor (Amundsdotter 2009 b).

Action research is not a set of principles with clear theories and methods, but is rather a perspective on how to conduct research (Amundsdotter 2009b). It does, however, have an action orientation and supports normative change in one way or another (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson 2006). At the same time, new

knowledge should be created, which is a challenge to combine different purposes. The participatory research conducts research *with* the participants, not *for* or *on* them (Svensson et al 2002).

Action research has many common values with democracy, participatory, growing, emancipation, a better world, sustainable development and more (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson 2006, Reason & Bradbury 2001, Greenwood & Levin 2007, Hansson 2003, Härnsten 2008, Maguire 2001). Some of the action research is, for me, closer to a feminist perspective, notably the part that emphasizes democracy and criticizes authoritarian structures and cultures in society (Aagaard Nielsen & Steen Nielsen, 2006).

“We cannot choose the commitment—as human beings in the real world we are committed. Commitment is a basic structure of any kind of human living.”
(Skjervheim in Aagaard Nielsen & Steen Nielsen, 2006, page 70).

Research requires relationships, according to Skjervheim. Reflection is not generalities, but is used in order to deconstruct the current reality and create new realities. Society is frozen in several ways and the challenge for action research is to defrost it. The reality will be deconstructed and the goal is to create something new beyond just improvements and instead go for dreams, utopia and visions (Ibid, page 78). The combination of the gender research and the action research has helped me to have a theoretical framework and methodological ground for different group processes (Argyris & Schön 1974, McGill & Brock Bank 2004, Aagaard Nielsen & Steen Nielsen 2006). The methodology includes dialogue, critical reflection, and a search for a transformative change. In a survey of action research—*Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*—the researchers argue that there are major opportunities in the meeting between action research and feminist research (Greenwood & Levin 2007). Action research can offer feminists a greater awareness of a variety of intervention and group process techniques that have been developed through participatory research. These techniques can support the feminist commitment to activism and social change goals (ibid, page 166).

To use a gender theoretical frame is not common in Action Research. Andersson (2009) stresses that action research that has been criticized for a lack of gender awareness and power relations (Maguire 2001) would benefit from using gender theory in power analysis. The development in the Nordic countries with clear democratic ambitions has to some extent challenged the uneven relation between researcher and participants (Gunnarsson 2007).

One purpose with a shared knowledge process is to create a reflecting community (Svensson 2002). Researcher and participants explore problematic situations together and the thinking and action is intertwined (Ibid). The theory can contribute to learning from experiences and through that reach reflected knowledge. But the practice is necessary to give the theory content. Svensson (2002) stresses that theory can liberate experiences, which can contribute to change. The theory can guide the development work.

LEARNING COMMUNITY

One inspiration behind the use of the concept “Learning community” comes from Community Action Research (Senge & Scharmer 2001). The action researchers have developed a theory and methodology about learning as a community of practitioners, consultants and researchers. The following refers to their description (Ibid): Community action research focuses on fostering relationships and collaboration among diverse organisations and to “...creating settings for collective reflection that enable people from different organizations to ‘see themselves in one another’”. (ibid: p 238)

In order to create new knowledge, you need a shared understanding for theory development, tools, and practical knowledge as equally important parts that are dependent on each other (Ibid).

Different kinds of reflecting teams (McGill & Brockbank 2004) help to create a space for reflection and challenge. Going deeper into an organisation gives an opportunity to shared perspectives that can contribute to new insights and learning. One important aim is to create knowledge through critical and creative reflections. This also means that interventions are welcome, from all in the group. Interventions can be performed in different ways. One way is to conduct critical reflections that challenge or undermine norms and things taken for granted. Another type of intervention is to make observations and simply feed back what you see and hear. That kind of reflection can be seen as intervention as well.

Experiences taken from the Gender Network were the importance to build a group for support and reflections, a group that could function effectively together. One way of building the group was to make agreements within the group. This was an experience we took into the next group, the Learning Community. At the first meeting, the following agreements were made. At the second meeting, these agreements were reflected upon, to see whether they work, if something is missing etc. In summary, the agreements made were:

- Contribute to the group,
- Be open to experiments,
- Be present,
- Do not judge or give answers/solutions,
- Confidentiality,
- Listen to each other and allow everyone the chance to be heard,
- Be honest and open,
- Challenge constructively,
- Emotions can be expressed and will not be rejected,
- Have respect for time frames,
- Awareness of diversity,
- Maintain the high priority of our meetings.

And finally – it is ok to change one's mind. The agreements were sent out to everyone and during the meetings, they were on the wall and reflected upon afterwards.

Successes from Community Action Research, that Senge and Scharmer (2001) point out, come from a group of people committed to linking deep change at both a personal and organizational level, using tools based in deep theory and wanting to integrate research and practice. In order to connect the different knowledge and experiences that researchers and practitioners have, a genuine partnership is needed. One part of this understanding is also to reflect and learn about the knowledge-creating process itself, which, in practice, meant to have regular time for reflection on different levels – individual, group, and organisation – to enhance the awareness, learning and possible change of actions.

Senge and Scharmer stress that people learn best from and with one another; in other words: Learning is social. A commitment can grow in those processes, which means that they come alive in what we do, not what we say (2001).

The Group: Its role and importance

The Learning Community has met two times as a whole group. Words from participants when we have reflected over learning and outcome of the meetings have been about the power of hearing others thoughts and experiences and getting a chance to reflect about one's own organization and one's self as a part of that organisation. It has been possible to conduct reflections and learning at several levels, which, by my experience, takes a while to build before it is possible to do. It was very clear to us in the Project team and some others in the group that we built a foundation on earlier work. I will therefore go back to the Gender Network in order to understand more.

One important part of the processes in the Gender Network was the opportunity that through this network form, the participants are given the opportunity to reflect with others about their own organizational lives (Amundsdotter 2009a). By learning from experiences through reflection with others, possibilities open up for the reconsideration of past events, making sense of one's actions and finding new ways of behaving at future events (Ibid: 13). One part of this education is recognizing the link between action and learning. The other part is making the action learning process supportive and challenging.

However, in order to not only confirm each member in a group but also be able to create a constructive climate of challenge for each other, confidentiality is an essential precondition. Cultivating trust is another crucial aspect of the work in order to function well and be able to learn through knowing, doing and feeling (Ibid: 19).

McGill, Brockbank and Beech (2002) stress the importance for the potential learning relationship of giving opportunities for uncertainty and unstableness. This is what can happen if we reflect on organizational contexts that are taken for granted, for instance. The openness, with feelings or emotions, is needed in order to trust the learning context:

“When we really learn, particularly that which is potentially transformative, we lay ourselves open to uncertainty and can be temporarily unstable.” (Ibid: 9)

To challenge embedded discourse is to uncover the taken-for-granted status (McGill et al 2002). One important part of building a group where this can be possible – to uncover power relations and interactions – was to build both support and critical reflections. Support is necessary, but not sufficient, to challenge prevalent assumptions and norms in a group (McGill & Brockbank 2004). The learning process gave a possibility to make power relations and norms clear (Andersson & Amundsdotter 2010).

A commitment in the group, of wanting to contribute to each other's learning, made it possible to do different kinds of creative and critical learning processes. The point is also that by sharing observations and analyzing them, for instance, insights and thoughts around norms, interactions and power relations in their respective organizations are possible.

What guided this learning process, how it was facilitated, had a ground in the connection between reflection and development. A learning process that is built on reflection and closely related to development is evident in development strategies built on innovations systems and networks (Svensson & Sjöberg 2009).

How things were done in the network was very important. The different knowledge processes, stories from actions, surveys everyone did and gender observations were all starting points for the knowledge process.

Process leading is meant to guide the learning process about gender and to create knowledge not only about gender in the different organisations and about the focus on the middle managers' agencies but also about change processes themselves. A central part of action research is a basic optimism concerning the human ability to learn from joint experiences in groups (Berge & Ve 2000).

Using gender theory meant a critical reflection and understanding of everyday life in the organisations. A tendency to “*cancel*” the role of gender, which can be seen as a form of resistance, makes it especially useful for finding ways to intervene in order to create learning through creative and critical reflection (Amundsdotter 2009b). In order to enhance that joint learning and sharing, trust and commitment were the cornerstones for building the group.

Experiences from the Gender Network has been transferred into the Learning Community, not least the least of which was the fact that eleven of the participants – including researcher, process leader and project leader – were a part of the Gender Network. That fact contributes a lot to the fact that the group was able to form a foundation for joint knowledge production quite quickly. In the example from Action Community Research (Senge & Scharmer 2001), they met for several years, which makes our example a smaller version – and still possible with the background in the former R & D – project. That means that several of the participants started their “journey” in 2006, when the former project started. The word journey has been used of several participants in different networks, often to describe a big impact on that person (Amundsdotter 2009b). A journey can be seen symbolically as what moves one to another point, changes perspective, sees other things. Participants in the community action research also use the word journey, to describe the strong impact the work on sustainable development had on them (Senge & Scharmer 2001).

ONE MEETING WITH THE GROUP OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The group met for the first time as a group (as I mentioned, many had been in the Gender Network together) in December 2009. There was a meeting between the next big meeting during following winter. The empiri, which will be presented, took place in May 2010, the second big meeting.

The participants got the task between the first and second meeting to conduct a gender observation of something they wanted to explore. Gender theory and the earlier presented model of how gender is created in organisations was a foundation and the agreement was to observe something they wanted to study in their organisation from a gender perspective.

They also had that task before the first meeting. It was then clear that quite a few of the participants didn't really know what to look for. But after having had two days in the group, with thoughts, lecturing about gender theory and sharing experiences of different things, it seemed to get more clear. In addition, training, to do not one, but several observations, is also learning to look for gendered meanings and expressions.

Earlier work with gender observations in groups of change agents show a big potential to create awareness and interventions in norms and things taken for granted (Amundsdotter 2010).

The process of working with knowledge processes from the gender observations was done in several steps. The first step was to meet in smaller groups, mixed with participants from different organisations. They shared their observations – what they had done, what they saw and reflections around that. The smaller groups, who all had an appointed group leader, then looked for patterns and variations in their stories. Examples of questions to the stories were: Was something surprising? Was something told again and again? .

The second step was then to gather all groups for a joint session. The group leaders, four people, formed a small circle in the middle. The task was to have a dialogue in the inner group about what had happened in their respective group, which I will get back to soon.

The third step was to let the “outer” circle, the rest of us, have a dialogue about what we heard and thought of the conversation in the inner circle – we became a “reflecting team”. Reflections were made within the framework of what we heard, what we did not hear, or perhaps something that was left out that was striking, for example.

The group in the middle did not join, but listened to the conversation around them. The fourth and final step at the time was to conclude with a joint dialogue of the whole group – the inner group then moved their chairs and joined the rest.

The Dialogue in the Inner Circle

One observation that was described was an example of what the observer thought she would see, but did not occur. She observed the interaction of a gender mixed group working with education around construction work. She thought the male colleagues would dominate the meeting. Instead she observed a climate of listening, paying close attention to each other and equal sharing of the time space. She was surprised.

Another observation was about a group of men visiting an industrial workplace. The man who showed the group around also took the men to the dining room for some coffee. This man had to leave earlier so he left the group of men in the coffee room. Eventually the men left and the man went back to clear the coffee room. The room had been totally cleared, the dishes were washed and the tables were cleaned. He was proud that the group of men had taken responsibility for that.

The next morning he met with a female employee who told him that she had worked late and had gone to the dining room to have dinner. The room was rather messy, so she cleaned it up before she had her dinner. Another man, who, like her, had been to some training on gender equality, asked her why she did it. He had also been in the dining room late and seen the mess, but had not done anything about it. It was the other man's group visit and he should do it.

One commented that it was typical that the woman took that responsibility. Another said it was good that the man asked her why she did it, as a way of questioning gender marked activities. A third one suggested that, on the contrary, the man's reaction was very "typically" gendered: He saw the mess but left it, for it was not "his".

The observation was reflected upon and new perspectives and interpretations were made. One important outcome, as stated by the observer, was that now the three people at the company (the two men and the woman) had a joint language to talk about interactions between men and women at the workplace. A language based on knowledge about doing gender and power relations connected to gender.

The group continued with an observation: It was a meeting for managers that were supposed to last for one hour. It was said that a special topic was the most important part of the meeting, and one of the women was supposed to talk about new concepts. A man was supposed to talk about something else, so in all there were two presenters. The man started, and talked for half an hour. When she finally got the attention, he interrupted her and talked several times. She didn't have time to finish what she was going to say, so she sent her presentation out by mail instead. The observer was one of the managers in that group. She saw this and was very frustrated that she didn't act and wondered why. Why didn't she support the woman so she got the time she was supposed to have? Why didn't anyone else do that? She felt disappointed in herself.

The group talked about how easy it is to do nothing, mostly from fear of conflict. Another said that this was a typical example of gender relations that stopped the business. The woman was going to talk about business concepts, which instead was mailed to the group, and could probably be seen as a less effective way of communication than a managers meeting. That the man got the time without being stopped could be seen as an effect of the gender order, with men, as a group, as superior.

Another observation was described. There was a meeting about strategies, with five people, four men and one woman. They were supposed to present their field and then talk about strategies and priority. The format for the meeting was that each person would get 10 minutes to present his or her work. When the woman started to present, she was interrupted after one minute by one of the men who totally devalued her area. She finally got the floor again, but then after a couple of minutes the leader of the meeting

interrupted her and supported the previous man's critiques. The woman felt very bad and felt that no one in the room was aware of what was happening; or they were aware but didn't oppose what was happening. She felt she was treated disrespectfully.

One participant said, 'what do you do when you are "alone" in seeing or experiencing some treatment?' No one answered, and another participant continued with a new observation: At an industrial workplace, one person had observed how often men were gathering around a machine. When one man has problems with a machine, other men come to support that man. When a woman has a problem with a machine, men do not gather – and neither do women. She has to go to the manager and ask for help.

Different interpretations were made in the group – bonding between men but also expressions of lack of effectiveness. The men can allow themselves to leave what they are doing. While women, as one of the women from a similar workplace said, are "good girls" and deliver what is expected of them – what they sense is expected, often this kind of expectations is in "the air" and therefore subject to different interpretations, was also said.

The Outer Groups Dialogue

When the outer group was having their dialogue, someone asked, 'what would happen if a group of women gathered around a machine like that? Would that be accepted? Would that ever happen?' Several in the group agreed that that would simply not happen. Women would not do that – and if they did, it would be met with outside reactions; they would challenge a space that the men have taken.

Others suggested that men really have a need for bonding, for feeling the importance of belonging to a group. When the men gather round a machine, it is to support and watch the man who is the expert in fixing the machine, one of the men claimed. The message is then "we know you can fix this, so we will watch and support you doing it". Other men agreed to that description.

The outer group observed that women seemed to work with things that had a lower value than what the men did in the organisation.

Finally, in the concluding part of the process, comments about doing gender were done – how apparent it is that gender is done in interaction. Interesting, learning but also upsetting – a lot of inequalities and unequal conditions were uncovered.

THE RESEARCHER ROLE

I perceive my Researcher role in the Learning Community with inspiration from Aagaard Nielsen and Steen Nielsen:

"The Action Researcher's role is to intervene in social and cultural processes trying to organise them in the form of a knowledge creating process" (2006: p. 67).

I use the concept of Participating experience (Hastrup 1995); instead of participating observations she wanted to contribute to a more equal relationship between the researcher and the researched. The knowledge process, based on gradually acquired personal experiences and insights, moved to the centre of her attention (Eikeland 2006). In other words, I, like the others in the room, share thoughts and experiences that I have.

Since we are two researchers, this gives an important opportunity to reflect on what is happening in the group. We have meetings in between, also with the project manager, and make reflections and interpretations of what is happening. We also plan the meetings, together with inviting all the participants to express needs and ideas, which also is done in the group. The meetings are then designed.

The meetings are taped, which give an opportunity to deepen our interpretations. The plan is to feed back these interpretations to the community, and make joint analyses of outcomes and experiences made.

Everyone in the group, which the agreements open up for, can make interventions. That is also as I see it, a way of addressing power relations in the group: The network agreement is a design where everyone has a voice, and by contributing to each other you challenge power relations. Also outspoken in the Learning Community, in a couple of organisations, some of the participants are there with their manager. In that kind of power relation, it is encouraged to be outspoken. Also, in the roots from Action Research, with Kurt Lewin as a founder, experiments in groups with democratic processes were central (Aagaard Nielsen & Steen Nielsen 2006). Lewin wanted democratic cultures to grow, through joint learning (Ibid). The participants received training in the democratic method of working in a group.

This is something I see in Learning Community – the way we work in the group opens up for active listening, new perspectives and awareness. The participants from one of the industrial, male dominated workplaces for instance, have openly expressed that HOW we do things in the Learning Community is very new – and inspiring – to them. They took some of the processes and methods they learned at the Community to their own organisation and used it with other colleagues.

DISCUSSION

(This late part is to be developed...)

I think that how the learning and knowledge processes is performed affects both what we can understand and see as well as how the group can develop in its function.

By using theories and methodologies from the different research fields opens up the possibilities to create more sustainable change processes, which can contribute to gender equality and gender awareness in organisations. The kind of learning processes and researcher role in use, opens up for different kinds of interventions in the Learning Community, which aims at uncovering norms and things taken for granted which function as resistance to a normative change.

One key conclusion is that it matters both WHAT we do and HOW we do it. By using knowledge and experiences from the two research fields, change processes can be developed that challenges images of women and men and different construction processes in the organisation that limits people including the ability to be innovative. It is connected – the organisation itself and what it produces. If the interactions look a certain way, it will affect what is possible for humans to do in that context, or as certain humans can do, power relations that exclude women for instance. Can it even be so, that a gender aware organisation can be seen as an innovation in itself? If you start to go outside normative thinking, which often means exclusion of perspectives but also possible humans, will you not only see new ways, new possible patterns of actions, but also new thought patterns that can open for new insights and possible new innovations?

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